

## 5.

Amelia wanted to go straight home after leaving Alex. It had been almost two weeks since she'd had a letter from Salih, and she had a niggling feeling that there might be one there, right now, waiting for her. But she was not able to go straight home today. Today was the day she spent an hour lying prone on Janelle's physical therapy table.

"Does that hurt?" Janelle asked. At this moment, she was gripping the lower half of Amelia's right leg, gently pushing it up until Amelia's knee was almost touching her chest.

"Yesh," Amelia replied.

"Pain scale?"

Bending Amelia's leg at the knee caused pain in three locations: in her hip was the exhausted, grateful pain of being forced out of a position in which it spent too much time; her knee countered with a prickling sensation inside the skin as it stretched over the bone; then there was the ankle, which Janelle kept flexed by bracing Amelia's foot against her shoulder, and cried out against Janelle's incursions against its sovereignty with an irate and impetuous heat. Underneath all of this was the low-level hum in Amelia's bones, an ever-present, impossible-to-locate ache that never seemed to go away. For all this, Janelle wanted a single number, between one and ten.

"Three," Amelia said.

"Three?" Janelle asked. "That's better than last week."

"I shupposhe," Amelia said.

"You gave this a five when I did it last week. That sure sounds like an improvement to me."

Janelle was a solid, wiry woman who Amelia had only ever seen wearing a tank top and leggings. Amelia admired the muscular definition in Janelle's shoulders and forearms, the strength in her hands and fingers as she worked Amelia over, but Amelia could not make sense of Janelle's obsession with the pain scale. Amelia had once challenged Janelle on the pain scale's outrageously subjective nature, asking how she accounted for different responses between patients—or even different responses from the same patient, within the same session. Janelle looked perplexed.

“It's a ruler, basically,” she said, “but it measures pain instead of how long or wide things are.”

Only once had Amelia seen a rendering of the pain scale that made any sense, on the wall of her neurologist's office. It read like a kind of narrative:

- 0: No pain at all
- 1: Almost never think about the pain.
- 2: Pain is annoying with occasional stronger twinges.
- 3: Pain is distracting, but you can adapt to it.
- 4: You can ignore the pain only if you are deeply involved in an activity.
- 5: Pain can't be ignored for more than a few minutes.
- 6: Pain interferes with normal daily activities, such as standing or walking.
- 7: Require assistance to perform normal daily activities.
- 8: Physical activity is severely limited. Unable to think clearly.
- 9: Unable to converse. Unable to control pain-related vocalizations. No joy in life.
- 10: Unspeakable pain.

This version, at least, gave some context to the numbers, and made the scale more like the ruler that Janelle believed it to be. Even so, Amelia couldn't find herself in it. She already required *assistance to perform normal daily activities*, simply by being who she was. The mere physical facts of her life put her beyond level six, whether or not she was even experiencing any pain. There was no way around it: the pain scale was for other bodies, other minds, people who were better at reducing their experiences to single digits.

Janelle switched to Amelia's left leg.

"Have you given any thought to what we discussed last week?" she asked.

"No," Amelia said.

"Why not?"

Amelia didn't respond.

"Physiologically speaking," Janelle said, "there's no reason why you can't use crutches. You have the arm strength. You have the upper body strength. Crutches are a good stepping stone."

"To what?"

Janelle gave her an incredulous look. They had, after all, had this conversation a few times already. "To walking on your own," she said.

Back when Amelia was still attending support groups, there was a woman named Carrie who told a story of a chiropractor she'd gone to see who, on her first visit, told her that he could cure her stutter. Like Amelia, Carrie had stopped seeing speech therapists many years before, having concluded that her speaking difficulties were neurological in origin and out of her

control. The chiropractor agreed with Carrie that her speech problems were rooted in her brain, and not in any kind of muscular deficiency in her mouth or throat, but he insisted that she could rewire her brain by doing an exercise in which she lifted one arm and moved her head from side to side, ten times daily. He claimed to have ‘cured’ three stutterers this way. Carrie never went to him again, and reported him to the Board of Chiropractic Examiners. Amelia sometimes thought about doing something similar to Janelle. Unlike the rogue chiropractor, however, Janelle wasn’t making offers beyond her field of expertise, and hadn’t claimed to have ‘cured’ anyone. She was just an insensitive bitch, and this was not a fireable offense.

“Have you ever tried using crutches?” Janelle asked. “If it was a while ago, I can tell you that they’ve changed a lot. They’re a lot lighter, and much more comfortable.”

Janelle braced Amelia’s other foot against her shoulder and leaned in again. Amelia’s hip muscles groaned, resisted, and then gave.

“Pain scale?”

“Two,” Amelia said.

“Hmmm,” Janelle said, “I felt something else in there. Are you experiencing a loss right now?”

“What?”

“There’s something else pushing back today besides regular muscle resistance. Something more on the energy level. It’s like you’re protecting a wound.” Janelle held her hands over her heart to demonstrate the kind of protecting Amelia was apparently doing.

“No,” Amelia said, “there ish no hearthbreakh.”

Janelle slowly released Amelia's leg, gently lowering it to the table. She walked around the table, lifted up Amelia's left arm, and began massaging her shoulder.

"This is a safe space, you know," Janelle said.

After particularly annoying sessions, Amelia would look into how much it would cost to find an out-of-network physical therapist who specialized in everything she needed them to specialize. The price tag was, to put it mildly, prohibitive. Amelia's visits to Janelle were fully covered by her insurance. Putting up with Janelle's insensitivities, her new-age claptrap, and her weird obsession with the pain scale was really just the hidden co-pay for the visit. Amelia reminded herself of this, and finished out the rest of the session in silence.

Now she wanted more than anything to go home. There was no doubt in her mind that a letter from Salih would be waiting for her. There had to be. He couldn't go this long without writing to her. But she had one more appointment, this one with Dr. Wittenberg, her neurologist. Of all the medical professionals Amelia saw on a regular basis, Dr. Wittenberg was the least invasive. She never left his office feeling worked over, beat up, or physically exhausted. She had also been seeing him for nearly fifteen years, longer than any of her other practitioners. As such, his attitude towards her tended towards the paternal, and Amelia didn't mind. His questions, though, sometimes left her with an unsettled quiet, turning her attention in directions she didn't always want to look.

"How is swallowing?" he asked today, after shining his pen light in her eyes and tapping her legs and elbows with his rubber mallet.

"Shwallowing?"

"Yeah. You know, food? Water? Any trouble since your last visit?"

Lately, Amelia had been having trouble with every third or fourth bite of food, though she'd attributed this to anxiety. She'd never experienced anything like what she was going through with Salih, neither the depth of her feelings for him nor his sudden departure. It gave every day an uncomfortable cast, as if all of the commonplace objects in her world were a few shades off the right color. It made sense that eating would become a little fraught.

"No," she said, "no trouble swallowing."

"Okay, great. How about the shaking when you move your arms. About the same?"

"Yesh."

Dr. Wittenberg made some notes in his chart. He continued through his usual barrage. Any changes in her eyesight? Speech? Any new pain that couldn't be accounted for? (Amelia always said no to this one, as saying yes would lead directly to the pain scale.) Any difference in her ability to concentrate? Amelia answered in the negative to all of these. Then Dr. Wittenberg stopped, peering closely at something in her chart.

"Huh. Well."

Amelia felt her body tighten. Something different was about to happen.

"Looks like we should discuss the results of your last hearing test," he said. "You've lost some sensitivity in the higher and lower frequencies."

"Okhay."

"It's like your hearing is a tube, and it's getting a little bit narrower. Does that make sense?"

"Yesh."

“Now, this kind of degeneration is normal for someone in your position at your age. You are in excellent health, and the overall picture is very, very good. But this is something we need to keep an eye on, because auditory degeneration can be a precursor to other things. We’re not seeing any of those other things yet, based on what you’ve told me today, but we need to think of this as a yellow traffic light. Have you had any seizures?”

No, Amelia said, she had not had any seizures that she knew of.

“Well, you’d know if you had a seizure. Even at night. It’s not the kind of thing you sleep through.” Dr. Wittenberg laid his hands flat on the folder. He leaned forward. “If you do have a seizure, you need to let me know right away. I’m serious about this. As I said, you are in very good health, Amelia. We want to keep it that way.”

He gave her a long look over his glasses.

“Okhay.”

“So let’s schedule another hearing test for you in . . . oh, let’s say six months. That should be enough time to see if we’re looking at anything significant.” He looked down at her chart in his lap again. “Oh! Happy birthday next week!”

“Thankh you.”

“Looks like the big three-eight, yes? A good year, as I recall.”

Dr. Wittenberg saw Amelia out of the examination room and back into the waiting room, where she waited impatiently for the young man at the front desk to do all the typing and clicking he needed to do to confirm that Amelia did not need to make an additional payment for this visit. Then Amelia waited even longer while he scheduled her follow-up hearing test and her next office visit. Finally, all dates confirmed, she was free to go.

Down on the street, Amelia was confronted with the usual San Francisco mass-transit conundrum: would it actually take *longer* to get home if she waited for the bus? Not so long ago, this decision would have been dictated by the amount of charge left on her wheelchair battery. If the indicator was anything but green, she would wait for the bus. But Salih was an engineer. On their first date, sitting on a bench near Buena Vista park, he'd gotten down on his hands and knees next to her wheelchair and looked at how everything had been put together. He was appalled. What kind of battery is this, he wanted to know. A rechargeable one, Amelia had said.

"I can see that," Salih said. "But the charger. It is external, yes?"

"Yesh."

"It cannot be carried on the chair."

"No."

Salih clicked his tongue. Once an engineering team made the decision to use an external charger for anything they were designing, he explained, the charger itself was instantly consigned to an afterthought. All it needed to do was work; no consideration was given for its size, weight, shape, or appearance. In the case of her chair, it was an understandable decision—the chair was probably very expensive, and keeping the battery charger off-board was an effective way of maintaining costs. Looking her chair over, he could see many similar decisions.

"But the off-board charger has, I imagine, the greatest impact on your life. I can reverse this decision, if you like."

Salih got off the ground and returned to the bench. The entire date had already felt completely unreal to Amelia. She'd been flirting with Salih for weeks, from the moment he first

appeared behind the counter at Zaid's Falafel. Zaid's had been a once-per-week dinner stop for her, for years. She and the owner, Khalid, were on a first-name basis. He noticed whenever she missed a week, as did Narjis, his wife, who usually worked the register. To come through the door and find a new face—especially one as perfectly drawn as Salih's—was exquisitely disorienting. And he seemed to respond to her as well, meeting her eyes as she placed her order, presenting the plastic bag with her falafel wrap inside to her as if it were a religious offering. She began picking up her dinner there two times a week, and then three. She liked to watch Salih's hands move as he put her wrap together. She stared at his mouth as he told her the amount of money she owed. She didn't pull her fingers away when he handed back her debit card, didn't try to prevent her eyes from drifting down to the pleasant bulge of his stomach, didn't bother trying not to wonder about the territory just below that belly. Nor did she stop herself when she realized she was taking one of her cards out of the slot in her armrest, handing it to him, and telling him to give her a call. She wasn't expecting him to actually follow through, so finding herself wheeled up next to a park bench with him, on an unusually warm, fog-free evening was nothing short of surreal. Having him offer to modify her wheelchair for her was just another piece of the whole improbable scene. How, she wanted to know, had he learned how to do such things?

“I have a degree in engineering,” he said, “almost.”

“From where?”

“The University of Baghdad. I am hoping to finish here.”

Salih was quiet after that.

The bus was taking a long time to arrive. If Amelia started now, she would probably be home in about twice as long as it would take if the bus came right now. She stared down the street, squinting. Something larger than a car was shimmering into view. Garbage truck? UPS? No, it was the bus! Amelia readied her transit card. It took another fifteen minutes for the bus to work its way to Amelia's stop. When it finally arrived, the handful of people who had gathered at the stop shuffled impatiently as the driver lowered the wheelchair platform for her. Amelia had learned to ignore this, long ago, as well as the sidelong glances and heavy sighs of the people who were already on the bus as the driver lifted the seat that exposed the wheelchair securement straps. She was adding an additional five minutes to their bus ride, at most, and when it came down to it, all these people could be depended on to vote the right way when the time came. This was San Francisco, after all.

Once Amelia was fully strapped and secured, the driver returned to her seat and pulled the bus back out into traffic. Amelia stared out the window. What if there was no letter? Once a week, Salih had promised. More if he could. She knew better than to hold him to that promise, but almost two weeks was unbearable. She went over what she'd written in her last letter to him, about what she was undertaking with Pacific Bank & Trust. She hadn't spelled out all the details, of course, but she'd said enough for him to have an idea about what she was up to, and it was possible that he didn't approve, that he now considered it too dangerous to write to her.

Amelia hadn't told Salih exactly what she did for work right away. On that first date, she'd only given him the public version: she worked with companies who were being sued for violations of the Americans With Disabilities Act, the Californians With Disabilities Act, or both. Salih was not familiar with either law, and was impressed that such a thing existed.

“What happens when the law is broken?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Amelia said, “unless someone shues.”

“Shoes?”

“Brings a lawsuit.”

“Ah. You are a lawyer.”

“I am a consultant. I help the company that is getting sued. I help bring them into compliance.”

“There are degrees in this?”

No, Amelia said. It was a matter of timing, luck, and, eventually, experience. Once, a long time ago, she had been contacted by a lawyer, a friend of a friend, who needed to consult someone with actual experience navigating a building that was unfriendly to wheelchairs. Soon the lawyer was consulting her on a regular basis. And soon after that, she realized she could do better on her own.

Along with the compliance work, she also helped her clients see exactly what had gotten them in trouble in the first place. In a series of one-on-one sessions, she walked them through their hidden assumptions, their unconscious beliefs, and all the ways they'd absorbed what society had taught them about *people like her*. It was a kind of shock therapy. Amelia wasn't sure how long the effects stayed around, but even a tiny glimpse into a new way of thinking was worth something, she thought. And she didn't exactly mind making her non-disabled clients extremely uncomfortable, even if it was only for a few hours.

“And this makes enough money to live in San Francisco?”

“Yesh,” she said. It was technically true. The whole non-technical truth didn’t come out until their fourth date, and the third time they’d slept together. They were at her place, as they’d been the last two times. There was no privacy at the apartment that Salih shared with Khalid—who was Salih’s uncle, it turned out—and his family, above Zaid’s falafel, which they owned. By contrast, Amelia’s place, which occupied the first floor of her building—and which she also owned—she had entirely to herself. The first time Salih had come over, he walked around with an engineer’s eye, remarking on all of the “brilliant modifications”: extra-wide doorways, low counters, and handrails in important locations. But he’d done a little math since then, and now he had questions.

“How is it that you were able to purchase an entire building? As a consultant?”

Amelia had a dodge for this question: her parents had been wealthy, and they left her a large sum of money when they died. But lying there naked in bed next to Salih, with her hand resting on the gentle rise of his lovely, soft belly, the lie was suddenly unavailable.

“I have another jobh,” she said.

“What is it?”

Amelia made an attempt at backpedaling. “It’sh privathe.”

“More private than what we have been doing here in your bed?”

It was a good point. Amelia took a deep breath. “Shome of my clienths,” she said, “have thoo much money.”

“Too much money.”

“Yesh. Sho I move ith.”

“You move it? Where?”

Amelia was glad the lights were off and she couldn't see Salih's face. "Away."

"That does not really answer my question."

There were bank accounts, Amelia explained. The money made a trip through these accounts. Some of the accounts were in the United States. Some were not.

"Why do you do this?"

Amelia hadn't ever had to answer this question for another person before, with the exception of Alex, whose worldview did not include moral objections. Salih was a different story. Where should she begin? With her parents, who had not actually been the least bit wealthy? And which one? With her father, an employee of the United States Postal Service, whose health insurance didn't cover even a fraction of the care that Amelia needed? With her mother, a full-time school teacher, who took every extra job she could during the summers to pay for the occupational therapists that taught Amelia to live on her own? With how all of this robbed her parents of the retirements they so deeply deserved, and whose steady and wearing accumulation probably contributed to their deaths at sixty-three (her father) and sixty-eight (her mother)? Amelia did not want to blame herself for this. Her parents did not want her to, she knew, and to do so would have been a gross violation of their memory, of everything they had done for her, but the blame was there nonetheless. It was an ill-formed fury, a constant, low-level heat, like an underground river. Raging against the government, against society at large, against the culture that had allowed such a cruel system to flourish felt useless. It wasn't until she met Alex that she discovered, with him, a concrete way to change things.

Amelia did her best to explain this to Salih. She tried not to sound as angry. If she was really going to help Salih understand why she did what she did, he might as well hear the whole thing.

“So this money that you take,” Salih said, “you feel that you deserve it.”

Yes, Amelia said. Her expenses were considerable: medications, physical therapy, frequent medical checkups, not all of which were covered by health insurance. Then there was building maintenance, property tax, and the day-to-day realities of living in the city in which she’d grown up, which just happened to be one of the most expensive in the country. What was left over, Amelia donated to the institutions that had helped her to learn how to live independently.

In the dark Amelia felt Salih shaking his head. “I understand the reasoning, but these people you are taking money from. You could be honest with them instead. Why not give them the opportunity to donate to these organizations themselves? If you took the opportunity to educate them—”

“Your visha,” Amelia interrupted, “when didh ith exshpire?”

Salih was silent for moment. “How did you know that?”

“A goodh guessh,” she said. “Sho you are lying ash well.”

“No, that is very, very different. Do you know what my life would be if I was in Baghdad right now? This is not a comparison.”

What would her life be without her wheelchair, Amelia asked him? Without the hand rails that were attached to the wall around the toilet and in the shower? The prosthetics she used to type on the computer? Without her neurologist, her otolaryngologist, her ophthalmologist, or

her physical therapist? What would it be without her lawyer—Scott Blumenthal, who she had now known for years—for the times when her insurance provider suddenly decided it wasn't going to cover something it had said it would?

“Our liesh,” Amelia said, “are keephing ush both alive.”

“I do not approve,” Salih said.

“It'sh not up to you.”

“You could go to prison.”

“Andh you couldh get deporthedh.”

She could tell she wasn't going to convince him, or at least not right then. She changed the subject by scooting herself down until her mouth was in that delicious territory below his belly, which, she'd discovered on their second date, was even more lovely than she'd imagined.

Salih had never gotten over his objections to Amelia's other work. He continued to insist that their respective situations were not equivalent, that whatever injustices had been perpetrated against her did not justify stealing from innocent people, no matter how ignorant they might be. In Salih's case, the country he was lying to right now had invaded his own. They were directly responsible for creating the circumstances that had forced him to flee his own city. For him, it really was a matter of life and death.

Now the entire argument seemed silly and pointless. Salih was gone. For the second time, he'd had to flee.

The bus arrived at Amelia's corner. There were fewer people on board now, and most of them were absorbed in some way. A book here, a newspaper there, a couple of the new touchscreen phones. Her own cell phone was extremely difficult for her to use, and she was

curious about the new phones, whether they did anything that might make things easier for her.

No one looked up as the bus driver undid the straps that held Amelia's chair in place, or as he operated the lift that returned her to the sidewalk. She thanked him. He returned to his seat and pulled the bus partway into the street, blocking traffic so that she could cross more easily.

Home was only three blocks away from the bus stop. Amelia pushed her joystick forward, urging the chair up to its top speed. She was desperate for a letter. Whenever she received one, she would hold the envelope, knowing that he had touched it, that he had wet the flap with his tongue, sealed it with his fingertips. It was the nearest thing she had to his actual presence. She could hear him in the words he'd written, the lilt and turn of his voice. Two weeks was too long, far too long. It just wasn't possible that there wasn't a letter from him today.

At last, she was home. She rolled up the ramp to her front porch, scanned her fob over the electric door opener, went inside, and looked inside the box beneath the mail slot.

Nothing.

Amelia reached her hand inside and felt around, just in case it was stuck against the side of the mailbox, out of view. But there was still nothing.

Salih was withdrawing. He'd decided that her plan was too dangerous and he needed to cut off contact. That was the only explanation. She never should have told him about it, not even in the vague, detail-free language they'd agreed to use for that kind of thing. She should have just kept it to herself, and let him know once she'd gotten somewhere, when it was a done deal and he wasn't in a position to object. It was stupid, stupid, stupid to bring him in on it so soon. She would have banged her head against the wall, if Janelle hadn't left her neck so sore.

"Amelia? You're a little late."

Amelia looked up. David, one of her tenants, was standing on the stairs. She hadn't even heard his door open.

"Yesh, I . . . my appointments sh wenth a litttle long todhay."

"I was just going to put these things back in the box. I grabbed them by accident." David held out a small stack of mail.

"Ish there—ish there—"

"Yes. It's right here on top." He came down the stairs and put the items in her lap. There was a J. Crew catalog, something from the power company that was probably promotional junk, the latest issue of *The New Yorker*, and on top of that, a white #10 envelope with her name on it, underlined once with a single stroke. Her address was not on the envelope, nor was there a stamp. Amelia wasn't sure how Salih got these letters to her. He'd decided that it was safer for everyone if she didn't know.

It was all she could do not to cry with joy.

"Are you ready for me now?" David asked. "Or should I come back in a little while?"

"Now ish fine."

Amelia swiped her fob over the lock on her door. There was a click, and the door swung inward. David followed her inside, where she put all the mail on the table inside the door, except for the white envelope, which she placed on her desk.

"You don't want to read that before we get started?" David asked.

Amelia felt much calmer, now that the letter had arrived. She was aching to read it, but she preferred to wait until she was alone.

"I'm shaving it for later," she said.

“Okay, then.” David was visibly disappointed. “Which first, dinner or shower?”

“Shower, please.”

David followed Amelia into the bedroom, where he knelt down in front of her. She leaned forward until her head was resting on his shoulder. With one arm under her knees and the other around her shoulders, he lifted her up and out of the chair and carried her into the bathroom.

Amelia’s arrangement with her tenants was simple: in return for free rent, they provided Amelia with in-home care. David was one of three; between themselves, they organized who would cover the morning and who would cover the evening, on a monthly basis. It was a demanding schedule, but her current roster had been in place now for almost five years, with David having been around the longest. It was an excellent arrangement: Amelia’s tenants lived rent-free in one of the most expensive cities in the country, and Amelia received excellent care without having to hire a service—which would have meant paying tons of money to be manhandled by people she didn’t know, whose faces would be changing on a regular basis.

David set Amelia down on the bed and began unbuttoning her shirt. Amelia was capable of doing this herself, but where David would have her undressed and in the shower in about five minutes, Amelia would have taken almost an hour.

“Have you given any thought to what I suggested?” David asked.

Here, though, was the trouble. It was easy to confuse the physical intimacy of the job with emotional intimacy, and David was always the most confused. Though his virtues were considerable—a former dancer, he understood how bodies moved, how his own body moved in relation to other bodies, and so was able to assist Amelia with an uncommon grace—he couldn’t

seem to refrain from getting his nose too far into Amelia's business. A few times in their history together, Amelia had drawn a firm line and implemented a need-to-know policy, which David would respect for a few months before slipping back into his usual ways. Lines had gotten especially blurry after Salih left, when Amelia could barely keep herself together for even a few minutes at a time. She knew the consequences of losing composure in David's presence, but there was little she could do about it, and now he knew much more than he needed to know.

"No," she said, "I haven't."

David removed Amelia's shoes and socks, and unbuttoned her pants. "Why not?"

"Because I don't want to."

"How long has Salih been gone?"

There was no way Amelia was going to answer this question, not tonight, because she knew what it would get her. As of today, Salih had been gone for two months. David was surely aware of this. He looked her in the eye as he removed her underwear and helped her out of her bra.

"You could see other people," he said, "without being unfaithful to him."

"I know that," Amelia said.

"So what's up with the sudden monogamy, then?"

"Just go start the shower, please," Amelia said.

It was true that Amelia and Salih had agreed to a certain amount of latitude in this area. Amelia was constitutionally incapable of jealousy, and didn't feel that she had the right to constrain anyone's right to sleep with whomever she chose. She never doubted Salih's love or devotion to her. Where he was right now, she had no idea, but if it happened to be someone

else's bed, for a night or two, Amelia did not object. Her own libido was considerable. It was rare for her to go more than a month or two without an assignation of one kind or another, with one or two of her friends with whom she had some extra benefits. Salih understood this, and didn't want his absence to be more difficult for Amelia than it already was.

What she did not feel like explaining to David was that Salih had unwittingly brought her to a place that she did not want to enter with anyone else. Salih, as it turned out, was a *devotee*—a type of person that Amelia, in her dating life, had scrupulously avoided. She did not want to be with someone who wanted to fuck her because she used a wheelchair. She had no wish to be reduced to her disability. Objectification had its place, she felt—sexual desire couldn't exist without it, and sex was one of the best things about having a body in the first place—but objectification needed to be followed up by *subjectification*, with a genuine desire to *know* someone. Without that second step, sex turned cold and cruel. Devotees, Amelia thought, were not capable of subjectification. They couldn't see the person beyond the disability. The devotees Amelia had stumbled into dating wanted to get her into bed as soon as possible, and wanted nothing beyond that.

Salih did not even know the term *devotee*, didn't even know he was one. It was David who had pegged him. He'd seen him going in and out of the building with Amelia, had passed them together on the street a couple of times, and told Amelia what he suspected.

“He's one of them,” David had said. “He's got a thing for your chair.”

“Nonshenshe,” Amelia said. She knew the devotee vibe. Salih just didn't have it.

“Go ahead. Ask him. See if I'm wrong.”

David wasn't often wrong about these sorts of things, so it was difficult to ignore his assertion. Against her will, she began watching him more closely for signs that he was unusually interested in her physical limitations. She scanned his behavior in bed for clues that her disability was especially arousing to him.

"I've seen nothing," she said to David.

"Yes, but have you *asked* him?"

It ended up coming out on its own. One evening, sitting at Amelia's table over yet another round of falafel wraps from Zaid's, they began discussing their romantic histories. Amelia's romantic life started late—the boys in her high school were too immature to deal with a girl in a wheelchair—but once she got going, she began making up for lost time. There had been only two serious relationships, one in college that lasted a couple of years past graduation, another with a young man from her support group. The former was ended by her boyfriend decamping for a graduate program in Europe, the latter by Amelia's realization that she wasn't built for long-term monogamy.

Salih was vague about when he began having sex. It was clear he'd gotten a relatively early start (there was a best friend's sister in high school, with whom Salih engaged in some joyful experimentation) but he was shy about the particulars. As for long-term relationships, there was a woman he had been with as an undergraduate, a fellow student, about whom he spoke fondly, with an obvious warmth that piqued Amelia's curiosity. In the course of her gentle interrogation, she learned that this woman had some difficulty with stairs.

"How chome?" Amelia asked.

"Her legs," Salih said, "they were deformed."

Amelia cringed at *deformed*, but she let it go, for now. “How?”

“Something with the bones. When she was born, there were some missing.” Salih went to describe the crutches she used. Each one, he said, had a metal cuff that partially encircled her forearm. She was slight of build, and the cuffs were intended for arms that were much larger than hers. By the middle of each day, her shoulders ached terribly from supporting her weight. Salih, whose technical skills were already in evidence at that point, sawed the cuffs off her crutches and replaced them with padded, adjustable belts. All the materials had been recycled from other projects.

Salih related this story with obvious pride, and affection. There was also a deeper, more unsettling note that Amelia could not ignore.

“You love this woman,” Amelia said.

“This was before the war,” Salih said. “Her family was Shia.”

“You love her because of her legsh.”

“What do you mean?”

“What wash her name?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Justh thell me.”

Salih’s huge, brown eyes went all around the kitchen. “Marjana.”

“How wouldh you have felth about Marjhana,” Amelia asked, “if she didn’t ushe crutchesh?”

Salih looked confused. “She is a person. I would have loved her with or without the crutches.”

Amelia was furious. Salih wasn't even aware of what was driving his attraction. He'd never given it a moment's thought. Well, he was going to think about it now.

"But you *likhe* the crutchesh. The same way you likhe my wheelchair. You likhe how I *am* in the wheelchair."

"Well, yes. But you like things about me, yes? About my body."

"We are noth talking about the shame thing!" Amelia was shouting now.

"It is exactly the same thing! Bodies are what we see of each other, before anything else! If my appearance didn't have things you like, when you first saw me at Zaid's, you would not have looked at me a second time. You would have just bought your falafel and gone home. You like my body, and I like yours. Our bodies do wonderful things together."

Amelia asked Salih if he knew what a devotee was. He did not. She explained it to him, in great detail, along with her own experience with devotees. She had no problem with an appropriate amount of objectification, she said, but devotees took it a step too far.

"I am amazed there is a name for this," Salih said. "Devotee? Is that correct?"

"It'sh noth okhay!" Amelia yelled. "It'sh not goodh to have a prurienth intheresth in bodiesh with dishabilitiesh!"

"Would you like it better if I liked you in spite of your body?"

"Of courshe not!"

"Then what is the problem? If I desire you for your body, and I also treat you with respect, then where are things wrong?"

Amelia had been gearing up to throw him out. She was chagrined to have developed such feelings for Salih, only to discover that he was one of *them*. And she had missed it! Not only was

she going to have to reckon with the disappointment, somehow she was going to have to recalibrate her devotee radar. But Salih's question brought her up short.

"Whath did Marjhana thinkh? About your *interesth* in her?"

"It did not come up. Not like this. And I was . . . I was her first lover."

"Why did you break up?"

"As I said. It was before the war."

Many of Salih's stories ended with this coda. It was clear that Salih would still be with Marjana if it hadn't been for the war. His feelings for her were undeniable. Whatever desires had been stoked by her disability, they only occupied a small corner of the room he kept for her inside himself. It was possible, Amelia realized, that Salih might build a similar room. For *her*.

She asked her next question slowly.

"What khinds of things dho you want to dho with me?"

"Eat more good food." He pointed to his falafel wrap, which he'd put down when she started yelling at him. "Go to the movies. Sit on the bench in the park some more—"

"I meanth shexhually."

"Oh. I see." Salih's face grew serious. "You really want me to say?"

"Yesh."

"I want to have sex with you in your wheelchair." He covered his eyes with his hand.

Amelia looked at him. The notion held no interest for her at all. It sounded unnecessarily complicated. But it was something Salih wanted—and wanted badly, judging by the amount of squirming he was doing. What did she have to lose?

"Let'sh go," she said.

Salih dropped his hand from his eyes. “Now?”

“Yesh. Righth now.”

Amelia wasn't wrong about it being complicated. In order to get inside her, Salih had to grip her armrests and assume a kind of half-squat. This looked uncomfortable to Amelia, but Salih definitely did not care. Once he'd fully accepted Amelia's assurances that she was fully on board, he lost himself in a way that Amelia had never seen before, in him or anyone else. His usual reserve and graciousness disappeared. In its place was a singular craving, an appetite so pure that Amelia couldn't help but respond in kind. That Salih was reacting to her this way, that her body could cause him to drop each and every pretense was utterly intoxicating. She stared at his face the entire time, awed by the truth of what she saw there: Salih found her completely irresistible. And in the moments that his eyes were actually open, she knew that he found the same truth written on her own face.

When they were done, they slid to the floor. Salih rolled them over so that she was lying on top of him, her head on his chest. She asked him if his offer to put a charger on her wheelchair was still good.

“I will do anything you ask me to do,” he said.

Over the days and nights that followed, Amelia felt herself expanding. Her life suddenly possessed entirely new dimensions that her soul rushed to fill. Salih was right: not only was there was no contradiction between his desire for her body and his love for her as a person, they were converging into each other, creating a new thing that Amelia had never seen before. She wanted Salih in a way that she'd never wanted anyone. Moving through the streets, through her day, she felt powerful and present, knowing that the source of Salih's love, the magnet for his erotic

imagination, was inside her. Confidence had never been a problem for Amelia, but this was something different. She felt taller, deeper, wider. She invited Salih into this new space inside her, and found it inside him at the same time.

She never told David just how right he had been about Salih. Now, as David carried her into the shower and set her down on the plastic seat, she debated whether to tell him. At the very least, it would help him understand why she wasn't interested in sleeping with anyone else right now. The only sex she wanted was with a devotee who was in love with her, and with whom she was in love. Right now, Salih was the only person in the world who fit that description, and Amelia strongly suspected that he would always be the only person.

David sighed and closed the shower curtain. "I'll go get your laundry started," he said.

#

Amelia's two other tenants, Brian and Frances, could not be more different from David, or from each other. Frances was stern but polite, and incredibly capable with power tools. She was the de facto super of the building. Amelia had always kept a list of plumbers, electricians, and repair people who could come on short notice, but she had not needed to consult the list even once since Frances came on board. She was able to perform most repairs on her own, and for the ones that required more pairs of hands, she had her own people. What she lacked in David's physical grace when it came to helping Amelia with daily tasks she made up for in pure solidity. Whenever she picked Amelia up out of her chair, her body felt to Amelia like the strut of a suspension bridge.

Brian, on the other hand, required a lot of encouragement. At twenty-six, he was the youngest and newest of Amelia's tenants, and despite having a background in social service and

possessing no squeamishness about bodily processes, he needed constant reassurance that he was doing a good job. And he *was* doing a good job. Amelia might have found his lack of confidence annoying, but the fact of the matter was that he was totally adorable, with his enormous puppy eyes, his head of brown curls, and his wide, toothy, unabashed smile. He often shared with Amelia the travails of his romantic life—which, unlike with David, Amelia did not object to—looking for perspective and advice. Brian was in graduate school, some kind of low-residency creative writing program, which his situation with Amelia made possible. When he learned that Amelia was dating Salih, he bubbled over with excitement. Apparently, Salih had helped Brian out one day, when Brian had stopped his bike in front of Zaid’s with a broken shifter.

“He came out to see what was up,” Brian said. “He looked at the bike, went back inside, came out again with a screwdriver and fixed it in like, two seconds. I don’t even know what he did. I mean, I’m sure it wasn’t a complicated repair or anything, but the way he wouldn’t take any money. He said I could pay him by going down the street to the Turkish café and getting him a cup of coffee. He was like, *really* specific. It had to be the Turkish place. He said if I came back with Starbucks he’d break my bike all over again and *no one* would be able to fix it. He’s from Iraq, right? I bet *he’s* got some stories. I can’t believe you’re dating him! That’s so awesome! I can’t wait to tell him I know you!”

Brian’s story had fascinated her, especially the way Salih had spoken to him, joking about breaking his bike again, as if Brian were a younger brother. Amelia couldn’t imagine Salih making a similar joke with her.

Frances never asked about Salih. She expressed no interest in Amelia's personal life whatsoever. She wasn't cold, exactly, but there was an efficiency to her time with Amelia that left no room for unnecessary details. It was something Amelia appreciated, between Brian's youthful inexperience and David's emotional porousness. Only once did Frances open the gate, and even then it was just a crack. It was the day that Salih had left. Amelia had just gotten the note when Frances knocked on the door and came in for the evening routine. Amelia did not want to go to pieces in front of Frances, and she managed to hold it together through getting undressed, through her shower, through drying off and brushing her teeth. But once they were in the bedroom and Frances was helping Amelia get into her pajamas, she began crying—deep sobs that seemed to come all the way from her stomach, from her legs, from the soles of her feet. Frances stopped what she was doing and let Amelia cry.

“Is it your man?” Frances asked.

“Yesh,” Amelia said between sobbing breaths.

“I'm sorry,” Frances said.

How did Frances know? Amelia never asked. She cried a long time. Frances stayed with her, saying nothing, and doing nothing more than the tasks that were required, but then she sat on the end of the bed until Amelia was asleep.

Amelia often wished that there was a way to make sure that Frances was her scheduled help whenever Salih's letters arrived. The letters left her sad and vulnerable, too available to David's probing and too exhausted for Brian's insecurities. With Frances, she just kept to herself. But the timing of the letters was unpredictable, and Amelia did not manage her tenants' schedule. They took care of that themselves, making sure that every shift was covered.

Tonight, David's disappointment in not being able to hear about the contents of Salih's latest letter was so palpable that she wanted him out of her apartment as soon as possible. As soon as he was done helping her into a pair of warm-up-pants and a t-shirt, she told him she'd changed her mind about dinner and would take care of it herself. He gave her a skeptical look, not because she wasn't capable of cooking, but probably because he knew there weren't a whole lot of groceries in the house.

"I'll order in," she said.

"Suit yourself," he said. "Do you want your laundry back tonight?"

"Tomorrow ish fine."

"Do you need anything else before I go?"

Amelia asked David to move her copy of *Bleak House* from the page turner in the kitchen, where she'd been reading it over breakfast, to the one near her bed. This was her fifth or sixth time through *Bleak House*, her favorite Dickens. Every possible attitude about money was represented there, in each of the characters, and the pleasure in watching these attitudes collide and mix helped Amelia to overcome her usual complaint about Dickens: the characters were static, their moral compasses fixed from the start, and so the intricately woven plots, for which Dickens was so celebrated, unfolded to Amelia like clockwork, rather than like life.

David retrieved the book from the kitchen and inserted it into the page turner. "Anything else?"

"Wouldh you turn on NPR for me?"

David went over to the stereo and turned it on. The closing theme of *All Things Considered* came from the speakers. There was at least one in every room of the apartment.

"There you go," David said. He glanced over in the direction of Amelia's desk, where the letter

was waiting, and then back to Amelia, as if hoping she would change her mind. “I’ll see you tomorrow—or maybe I’m not on again until Thursday? Yes. See you Thursday.”

“Yesh. Goodh nighth.”

David nodded and, at long last, left the bedroom. Amelia waited for the sound of the front door closing before zipping out of the bedroom and across the living room to her desk. Opening envelopes was a time-consuming process. If it had been Brian or Frances here tonight, Amelia would have asked one of them to open Salih’s for her. Asking David to do it would have been like sending a Weight Watchers client on a doughnut run.

Amelia’s letter opener, which she did not keep in a drawer, was designed to lie flat on her desk, with the business end sticking off the side. She held the handle in place with her forearm and maneuvered the letter along the blade. It often took multiple attempts, and the letter inside rarely survived unscathed. As such, Amelia took extra care with Salih’s letters, and took as much time as she needed to work the blade through the envelope without crimping the contents. Tonight, it took her almost half of *Fresh Air with Terry Gross* to extract Salih’s letter. She let the envelope fall to the floor and unfolded the letter on the desk.

Amelia my love,

I am sorry for the amount of time it has taken for me to send this letter to you. I can only imagine the pain this has caused you. Please understand that I was not in a situation where it was easy to send this. I have moved again and am now staying with some other friends. I know you want to be able to have pictures in your mind of where I am, who I am with, and what I am doing. I wish I could tell you about all of those things but I do

not think it is safe to do so. But more than wishing that I could tell you those things, I wish I could be with you again, right now.

Thank you for sending the picture of Zaid's that I asked you to send in your last letter. I am glad you did, even though I am sad to see it closed. You might think it is strange that I would want to see it this way, but it is important in ways that I cannot explain. It is like being in a boat and watching the waves it leaves behind in the water. But why is there a board over the window in the picture? Did someone break the glass? I hope my uncle has not seen it this way. His heart would break along with the glass.

And now I must talk to you about your plan. You are correct that I do not approve, and not only because of what we discussed before. It is not clear to me what you will gain from doing this. Whatever you find, no American court will want to look at it. Banks in America are allowed to do what they wish, and it does not matter what you or I might have to say about it, or what proof you may present of wrongdoing.

But even more important is that it is likely that you are being watched. It is bad to assume that the people who are looking for me do not know about our connection. It is in their power to find out about the work that you have done. If you are still doing that work, they will find out even sooner.

I beg you to keep the promise that you made.

Salih.